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Thomas Terry Williams, ~1803-1836

Successful planter, killed by a slave

By the time he was in his thirties, Thomas Terry Williams had assembled a sizable estate and he needed slaves to run it. According to the 1830 Census, he owned 10 slaves.

(1) He was referred to by newspapers of the day as “a worthy and respectable planter.”

He was married with three small children by the time he was 32.

And he never lived to see his 33rd birthday.

Slaveholders always were wary of unrest among the slaves, but never moreso than in the 1830s, after Nat Turner’s Rebellion, also known as the Southampton Insurrection, occurred in Virginia. In the August 1831 uprising, in Southampton County, slaves killed 55 to 65 men, women and children, wielding knives, hatchets, axes, and blunt instruments in the slaughter. They went house to house murdering entire families. Turner, who believed he was chosen by God to act, called on his group to “kill all the white people.” A contemporary newspaper report said his goal was “to strike terror and alarm.” They spared almost no one; a small child who hid in a fireplace was among the few survivors. It took a white militia with twice the manpower to beat back the insurrection, which was accomplished within two days. But Turner himself escaped and went into hiding for more than two months. (2)

The death toll was the highest of any slave uprising in the South, and fear was

widespread in its aftermath. On many plantations, slaves heavily outnumbered the whites, and the specter of slaves wielding weapons readily at their disposal was chilling. Rumors of slave revolt in nearby Wilmington, North Carolina, and as far south as Alabama spread among frightened whites. Alarm led whites to attack blacks across the South with little cause. Whites organized militias to fight back. (2)

On October 30, a white farmer discovered a black man hiding in a hole covered by fence rails. It was Nat Turner. He was tried on November 5 for "conspiring to rebel and making insurrection" and hanged on November 11, 1831. (2)

Others were tried in courts set up in Southampton and neighboring Sussex County specifically to hear cases involving slave uprisings. Most of the slaves were found guilty and many were executed. A few other counties had similar cases. The state executed 56 slaves for their role in the rebellion, and between 100 and 200 slaves and freed blacks were slaughtered by mobs and militias. In the spring of 1832, the Virginia General Assembly actually debated the future of slavery in the state, with some sentiment toward gradual emancipation of slaves. But the proslavery side won out. (2)

In the years that followed, slaveholders remained vigilant about uprisings. From Halifax and Pittsylvania counties, Southampton was but a few counties east along the Virginia-North Carolina border. Word spread quickly about such a serious matter as a slave uprising, to both the white slave owners and the slaves themselves.

By the spring of 1836, however, Thomas Terry Williams must have begun to let down his guard a bit. Four years had passed since Nat Turner's rebellion had been crushed. Slaves knew any revolt was likely to fail as that one had. And fresh in their minds they were the consequences: If they weren't hanged on the spot, they would be hunted down by a militia and killed.

With all those events in the recent past, Thomas Terry Williams set out on a spring day to oversee a crew of slaves getting up a tobacco plant bed. It was a Tuesday, March 29, 1836.

Here is Booboo's account of what happened, passed down through family oral history:

Thomas Terry Williams was sitting astride his horse, watching the slaves as they set fire to the plant bed site. They were burning it to get rid of weeds and sterilize it before planting seed for tobacco; later they would transplant the small seedlings from the plant bed into furrowed rows on the tobacco field. The bed, unlike the tobacco field itself,

would have required only a small area, likely a clearing in the woods, away from the tobacco fields. It probably would have been in an isolated area, with no one nearby. (3)

According to Booboo's account, Thomas Terry Williams must have been absorbed in his work, or distracted by the fire, for he did not see the slave creeping up behind him, wielding a stick of wood as a weapon. The blow to the back of his head would have been swift and precise, for it landed with deadly accuracy. Thomas Terry Williams fell from his horse, dead. (3)

Also according to Booboo's account, the other slaves were so upset, they picked up the culprit and threw him in the fire. "It was a gruesome thing," Booboo would say 142 years later – one she didn't like to talk about. (3)

The motivations of the miscreant slave were unknown, Booboo said. Perhaps he held "a particular grudge" against Thomas Terry Williams for prior disciplining. Or maybe he was a new slave. (3)

Until recently, most details of the incident were lost to time. Booboo was born 50 years after Thomas Terry Williams died, and her only knowledge of the attack came through her grandmother, Betty Williams. Betty herself was recalling the events third-hand, relating what she had been told by her husband, Samuel Carter Williams, who had been 4 years old when his father died. By the time Betty Williams was repeating the story to Booboo, Samuel Carter Williams had been dead for 30 years or more, killed in the Civil War, and nearly 60 years had elapsed since the murder. So some errors in fact could be expected.

Now we have recaptured details from contemporaneous news accounts that should be more accurate in some regards (or may not, given the nature of news reporting, then and now). The story of Thomas Terry Williams' death went national, published by newspapers as far away as Maine. I located four accounts: three virtually identical stories – all brief versions of the same story – that ran in newspapers in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine, (4) and a fourth, more detailed version that ran in the Public Ledger of Philadelphia. The latter was dated June 3, 1836:

"Murder. - Mr. Thomas T. Williams, a worthy and respectable planter of Pittsylvania, was killed a few weeks ago, by one of his negroes, under the following circumstances. He observed some misconduct in the negro, and undertook to chastise him, when the fellow ran into an adjoining piece of woods, and awaited the approach of his master, upon whom he inflicted a severe blow

with a stick, fracturing the skull to such a degree that he survived but a few days. The negro is now awaiting his trial. Mr. W. has left a wife and a young family to lament his untimely fate. – *Lynch. Virg.*" (4)

The other news accounts were less detailed. The Newark Daily Advertiser of June 1, 1836, published this item on page 2: "Mr. Thomas T. Williams, a worthy and respectable planter of Pittsylvania, Va., was murdered a few days since by one of his slaves. The negro is in custody." Similar items appeared in the Sun of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, on June 9, 1836, and the weekly Eastern Argus of Portland, Maine, on June 14, 1836. Other newspapers likely carried the news as well.

These differ in some key ways from Booboo's account, most notably: that the slave was not killed (my assumption was that he had died in the fire, though Booboo never said that); that he was awaiting trial for murder; and that Thomas Terry Williams lived for several days after the attack. (4)

Then another news story turned up that broke considerable new ground. David Leatherwood, a distant cousin researching his branch of the Williams family, came across the account in an 1852 Richmond Enquirer edition. The article revisited the Thomas Terry Williams murder as part of a debate about another slave killing. (5)

The slave accused of murdering Thomas Terry Williams was named Chester, but he was also known as "Jester." He wasn't Thomas Terry Williams' slave. His master was identified in the story as a Colonel Coleman; Chester must have been leased to Thomas Terry Williams for the day. Chester was taken into custody the day of the attack, implicated by the other slaves present at the plant bed and by Thomas Terry Williams himself. (5)

Justice moved swiftly in those days. Chester was arraigned on April 5, a week after the attack. He pleaded not guilty to the charge of beating Thomas Terry Williams with intent to kill him, and his trial was set for April 19. By that date, however, Thomas Terry Williams had died. He had clung to life for almost two weeks after the attack. At times he was delirious, according to the Richmond Enquirer story. But at times he also was lucid, and able to tell what had happened. With Chester now facing a murder charge and the death penalty, his trial was delayed. (5)

Fictional Account:

Thomas Terry Williams was expecting a typical day getting up a plant bed. He had to pick up a couple of extra field hands to help at the Coleman place, and then they'd be set. He found Chester and Brimus ready to go, but their attitude – at least Chester's – was anything but cooperative. They headed for the Williams farm, and on the way Chester said he wasn't feeling well and that maybe they could get the plant bed up without him. Thomas Terry Williams asked Brimus if Chester had said anything before now about feeling sick. "Nawsa, first I heard o' it."

When they got to the site, Thomas got the crew started on clearing it. They stacked underbrush to kindle a blaze that would burn off all the weeds from the plot. Chester seemed to be goldbricking, and the other slaves were picking up the slack. Thomas Terry Williams got after him, telling him he wasn't pulling his share of the load. Chester stood looking at him as if he didn't understand a word he was saying, and Thomas Terry Williams started toward him, thinking he must not hear him. At the sight of Thomas moving in his direction, Chester must have expected a whipping, and he wasn't waiting around to find out. He bolted for the woods.

Thomas Terry Williams started to go after him, but reconsidered. Better to let him cool his heels first and think about what he had done by running off. Besides, they needed to get the fire going so it would have time to burn out before dark. He and the other slaves lit the kindling and it was billowing white smoke within a few minutes. Then Thomas Terry Williams ventured to the edge of the woods, looking for the runaway Chester.

He was careful in his approach. He didn't know Chester that well, and he wasn't sure what Chester was capable of doing. At the same time, a slave attacking a slave owner was unthinkable. Slaves knew as well as anyone that the law would come down swiftly and mercilessly on any slave who assaulted slave owner. Thomas Terry Williams tread carefully, looking along the path at likely hiding places, and finally came to another small clearing in the woods, one where the sunlight filtered in through the canopy thanks to a fallen tree or two that had been uprooted by a winter ice storm. There, in the middle of the clearing, stood Chester.

"What're you doing, Chester?" Thomas Terry Williams scolded. "You better get back to the plant bed and go to work!"

"No suh, Massah," he said. "I's sick."

"Come on back anyway. I can't be out here messing with you while the bed's burning."

Chester didn't move a muscle at Thomas Terry Williams' command, except that his eyes grew wider as Thomas Terry Williams began to approach him.

"Don't come no closer or I'll KILL ya!" he shouted. Thomas Terry Williams still approached him, slowly, figuring it was all talk. When he got an arm's length away, he reached for Chester's shoulder to lead him back to the plant bed. As he touched him, Chester drew a handspike he'd concealed at his side and brought it down with all his strength on the side of Thomas Terry Williams' head. Thomas Terry Williams fell to the ground, and Chester hit him again on the top of his head with even greater force, and again and again on his arm and back.

Then Chester ran to the clearing and told the other slaves what he had done. He urged them to join him. The slaves were momentarily stunned and uncertain, but it didn't take long for them to reckon that Chester's bid for freedom was surely destined for

failure, and they didn't want to get caught up in it. A scuffle ensued after one slave told Chester he was a "damn fool," and Chester fell backward into the burning plant bed briefly, for just a moment, badly burning his legs. After that he took off for the woods again, a crazed look in his eyes. And he was gone.

The slaves went looking for Thomas Terry Williams and found him coming up the pathway from the woods, barely coherent. One got on each side of him and helped him walk up the pathway to the house.

"Chester killed me," Thomas Terry Williams kept saying. "Chester killed me."

Fact:

The trial was held July 19 in Pittsylvania County Circuit Court. The Richmond Enquirer story goes into great detail about the evidence in the case, which included testimony from two slaves.

The slave named Brimus testified that when Thomas Terry Williams had verbally chastised him, Chester had run into some nearby woods. Thomas Terry Williams had followed him there. He returned sometime later, bloody about the head and face.

A second slave named Hal testified that Chester had made a threatening comment the day before about "Tom Williams," saying he would kill him if there were "any fuss" during their morning chores.

Two doctors also testified about tending to Thomas Terry Williams, saying that he had a two-and-a-half-inch gash on the back of his head where he had suffered a skull fracture, and a "considerable" bruise and skull fracture on the side of his head, where the skull was depressed. He also had large bruises on his back and right arm. The doctors said they operated to remove pieces of the skull at the fractures. Thomas Terry Williams was lucid and able to communicate for three days after the operation, the doctors said, and he told them what had happened: that he had gone into the woods to discipline Chester for running off, and there Chester had threatened to kill him, then struck him on the head. According to another witness, William Womack, Thomas Terry Williams said that even after he was knocked to the ground, Chester continued to strike him. (5)

Particularly gripping must have been the testimony of David C. Williams, Thomas Terry Williams' father. According to the Richmond Enquirer, he testified "That he first saw [the] deceased about forty yards from his house, when his two negroes were carrying him – that [David C. Williams] went to him and said: 'Why, Thomas, what's the matter?' – and [the] deceased said, Chester had killed him. [The] Witness then asked him how it

happened? [The] Deceased said, Chester ran from him; that he pursued him, and when he came up with Chester, that Chester struck him with a large stick. [The] Witness carried [the] deceased, who was very bloody, into the house and sent for [the] Doctor... [The] Witness produced a large handspike in court and saith the deceased said (on the same having been shown him) that it was the stick with which Chester struck him..." Thomas Terry Williams told his mother "he certainly should die" from his wounds, they were so severe, and he repeated that belief to his doctors and others, the newspaper reported. (5)

The evidence was overwhelming. The defense based its case on intent, or lack thereof, saying Chester never intended to kill Thomas Terry Williams. But the slave Hal's testimony suggested otherwise. Chester was found guilty of murder. He was sentenced to hang on August 26. (5)

But that was not the end of the story.

With barely five weeks to go before Chester's scheduled execution, his lawyer sought extraordinary intervention. He secretly wrote Wyndham Robertson, the appointed lieutenant governor and acting governor of Virginia, requesting a commutation of Chester's sentence. Robertson was a Whig, the party from whose ashes the Republicans and Abraham Lincoln would rise two decades later, and he was given to liberal and paternalistic views on slavery. He was the perfect target for a defense lawyer's argument that a simple slave could never have planned and executed such a murder, and that the verdict was unjust. (5) (6) (7)

Fictional:

Contrary to what we've been led to believe about ante-bellum justice in the South, Chester was well represented. He had a "dream team" of lawyers – four counselors – to go up against two lawyers for the prosecution, and they gave the prosecution fits.

By April 19, when the case went to trial, Thomas Terry Williams had died. So the defense lawyers challenged the nature of the charges against Chester, which had been drafted while Thomas Terry Williams was still alive. They also challenged the admissibility of Thomas Terry Williams' statements after the attack because of his delirium. The judge, seemingly befuddled by the lawyers, concluded that there were flaws in the case as brought, "in manner and form," and therefore announced to the court that Chester was "acquitted and discharged of this prosecution." The judge immediately ordered that he stand trial the next day on a charge of murder.

Chester's "dream team" returned to court with an ingenious defense. They argued that another trial now would constitute double jeopardy, because the judge had already "acquitted" Chester of having the intent to harm Thomas Terry Williams. The judge rejected that argument and the trial was set for July 19.

At that April 19 hearing, Chester was still nursing the burns on his legs he had received during the scuffle with the other slaves. A reporter at the trial assumed they constituted the “disciplining” Chester had received at the hands of Thomas Terry Williams, and never bothering to ask, wrote in the Danville Reporter the next issue: “We are sorry to say that there were symptoms of violence manifested towards the prisoner which we had hoped never to see exhibited by the law-loving and law-abiding people of this country. We are aware that recent events have in a degree made it necessary for the public safety that an example should be made, and if one can be without violating the dictates of humanity, or the laws of the land, then let it be done, not otherwise. This truth should be impressed on the minds of all good citizens, that no people were ever injured by obedience to the laws, while a contrary course has ever proved rife with peril to the liberty and property of the country.”

The lawyers knew the facts and never made an issue of the burns in court. But the story was out there, and though the reporter had been duly chastised, his report was in print. And therein, the lawyer representing Chester saw an opportunity.

In his letter of appeal to Robertson, he wrote of “exigent circumstances,” and referred to the lawyers’ claim of double jeopardy which the trial judge had rejected. He also including newspaper clippings on the trial, and prominently featured the clipping that spoke in grandiose language about “liberty” and the “law” – allowing the governor to draw whatever conclusion he wanted from reading it. The implication was clear: that Chester had been abused.

Robertson would act without even seeking the prosecution’s counter-arguments....

Fact:

With little time to spare, Robertson ordered Chester’s sentence commuted from hanging to “sale and transportation” – essentially, banishment from the state to be sold into slavery elsewhere. It was a sentence commonly used for slaves who’d committed relatively minor offenses, but seldom if ever for a murderer. Because of the lateness of his decision, Robertson ordered a courier to deliver his order to the Pittsylvania County authorities and immediately bring Chester back to the state penitentiary. With sentiments running high about the case, Robertson also instructed the courier to be circumspect about his business as he traveled the county. He feared that if word spread before Chester was removed to safety, he might be lynched. (5)

By the time the news finally got out, Chester was safely en route to the state penitentiary and eventually to his new home – we don’t know where. The county prosecutor and slave owners were indeed outraged, and debate over the case would rage on for years. Slave owners felt such intervention by Richmond politicians encouraged slave violence. (5)

The argument was largely academic for Thomas Terry Williams' family, however. For the three Williams boys, the reality was their father was dead, and the judicial process had rubbed salt in their wounds while they were still fresh. That could explain the apocryphal story, almost Biblical in nature, that Booboo's grandmother told her decades later: of a slave who committed the ultimate sin and was cast forthwith into a fire of damnation. The actual outcome of the case was too difficult to explain.

The combined efforts of a crafty defense lawyer and a Whig politician had produced a most unlikely result: Chester, aka Jester, got away with murder. (5)

Thomas Terry Williams (~1803-1836) was a son of David Champness Williams (1756-1839) and Lucy Terry; he married Elizabeth Carter (~1806~1832), and they had son Samuel Carter Williams (1832-November 27, 1863); he married Mary Elizabeth Ann Fallen (October 8, 1837-October 2, 1917), and they had son Samuel Carter Williams Jr. (September 28, 1856-November 4, 1905); he married Minnie Eulalia Hodges (April 27, 1866-January 26, 1950), and they had daughter Ruby Hodges Williams (November 2, 1886 -May 10, 1987); she married Jacob Schofield Barnes (November 26, 1879 - October 8, 1953) and they had son Robert Fielder Barnes (May 25, 1912 - January 26, 1995).

Ruby is my great-grandmother's sister

- (1) 1830 Census Slave Schedule for Thomas Williams:
http://interactive.ancestry.com/8058/4411349_00669?pid=955254&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.com%2f%2f/cgi-bin%2f/ssc.dll%3ffindiv%3d1%26db%3d1830usfedcenancestry%26gss%3dangs-d%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dThomas%26gsln%3dwilliams%26gsln_x%3d1%26msrpn_ftp%3dPittsylvania%2bCounty%26MSAV%3d0%26uidh%3dxyc%26pcat%3d35%26fh%3d0%26h%3d955254%26recoff%3d5%26b6%26ml_rpos%3d1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true
- (2) The Nat Turner Rebellion, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nat_Turner's_slave_rebellion
- (3) Booboo Tapes, Tape 12: "He was killed by a slave. Didn't any of Grandpa's children, or Grandpa either, know anything about it. Because he was sitting on a horse, and the slaves were getting up a plant bed - now this is the way the story goes - but nobody knows the particulars because there wasn't anybody there but him and the slaves. And the other slaves said one of them got a stick of wood or some kind of stick, and walked up behind him while he was sitting on the horse and hit him on the back of his head, and he just fell off of his horse, dead; and that the other slaves picked up the slave that hit him and threw him over in the fire where they were burning the plant bed. I always thought it was a gruesome story. But nobody, nobody in the family, I've heard my grandmother say, it all happened when he was a

*My great-grandmother: Martha Price Williams
1896-1987*

young man. And my grandfather, his son, was just a small child when he died, just a baby. He had only three children. So that was all that was known about him. He was sitting on his horse and a slave ran up behind him and knocked him in the head with a stick of some kind and he fell off his horse, dead.” (Booboo tapes, tape 12)

- (4) News story on Thomas Terry Williams’ death in the Public Ledger of Philadelphia, June 3, 1836, available at www.newspapers.com; news stories from the Newark Daily Advertiser, June 1, 1836, page 2, the Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Sun, June 9, 1836, page 3, and the weekly Argus of Portland, Maine, June 14, 1836, page 4, all available through www.genealogybank.com; search for “Thomas Williams” with “Pittsylvania” as a keyword.
- (5) Story from the Richmond Enquirer of June 21, 1852, recalling evidence against the slave Chester: “COMMONWEALTH vs. CHESTER, a SLAVE. – In Pittsylvania County, Va., 19th July, 1836, tried and convicted of the murder of Thomas T. Williams, on 29th March, 1836, and sentenced to be hung on 26th August, 1836.... ”
- (6) Robertson was a Whig and disciple of Henry Clay, the same politician idolized by Abe Lincoln. Wikipedia entry on Wyndham Robertson: “Wyndham Robertson (January 26, 1803 – February 11, 1888) was the Acting Governor of the U.S. state of Virginia from 1836 to 1837. He also served twice in the Virginia House of Delegates, the second time during the American Civil War. Robertson was a Whig and was an advocate for Union during the secession crisis that precipitated the Civil War. However, after Lincoln's call for troops, he advocated secession. After the war, he was a member of the Committee of Nine that helped usher Virginia back into the Union....” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wyndham_Robertson\](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wyndham_Robertson)
- (7) Ironically, Thomas Terry Williams himself was a prominent Whig; he had just been nominated as a representative to a county Whig convention. From “Jester in Court,” a chapter in a book by David Leatherwood.